

Any colour, so long as it isn't black – this was the decorative mantra Ricky Clifton adopted at Portale's House, one of seven residences on the Italian family estate of Paola Iglioni. His chosen palette brings the hues of hydrangeas in from the garden, as Carol Prisant discovers. Photography: Eric Boman

'No such thing as bad colour'



Previous pages: Portale's House was built in 1870; the gardens, blossoming with hydrangeas, were planted in 1780. These pages: the kitchen walls are vivid chartreuse

The salon is painted in a shade of periwinkle blue, hand-mixed by Ricky. A mosquito-netted bed stands against the wall; the amphora is by Paola's ex-husband Sandro Chia





Top: the red bedroom is a symphony of checks, stripes and spots, including polka-dot Forties chairs and a Middle Eastern rug. Above left: the landing is decorated with strips of coloured wallpaper on a neutral background. Above right: the Bavarian wardrobe in the hall, painted a colour Ricky describes as 'Bloomsbury grey', is in deliberate contrast to its colourful environs

Top: the upstairs bedroom is painted in Ricky's favourite shade of blue, and contains an Italian chair given to Paola by the artist Cy Twombly. Above left: the former maid's room, in vivid purple, is hung with a European tapestry depicting Japanese ladies. The striped sheet is Turkish. Above right: the orange bedroom features another Turkish 'gaudy damask' pillow on the bed



There are seven houses on the grounds of Villa Lina, but Ricky Clifton (who's been referred to as a 'creative tornado', 'a magician' and, rather more dubiously, 'a cross between an enfant terrible and an idiot savant') has only worked on one: Portale's House. This, says owner Paola Iglioni (poet, publisher, filmmaker and descendant of dukes and popes), is now heart-stoppingly gorgeous, but also the source of several recent blips in the local creative energy field. And creative energy fields, along with kiwi crops, feng shui, ecstatic dances and hazelnuts, are what Paola is about. So when she told Ricky, her old friend and new decorator, 'Just remember you're in Italy. Don't do something dark and gothic,' what he heard (to his dismay) was 'I hate black'. His beloved rough-pale juxtapositions were in jeopardy, and he learned this only *now*, after the pair had schlepped suitcases full of jewel-hued Tibetan wallpapers from New York. (As Paola recalls it, anyway. Ricky recalls that they shipped the paper, only to find it being sold locally, which Paola doesn't remember at all. *Décor Rashomon*.) And when she asked Ricky to choose light-coloured papers only, then took off for Morocco, Ricky – you've guessed – didn't. After all, clients like Diane von Furstenberg, Rita Schrage, Brice Marden and Philip Taaffe have all accepted the fact that while 'they don't have to pay me much, it's *my* art.'

Paola is artistic, though. Not big on decorating, but genuinely artistic. She's pals with the likes of Cy Twombly and Gilbert and George and was even married once to Sandro Chia. She's proud of the fact, too, that her family's Etruscan compound has attracted generations of artists and intellectuals: poet Gabriele d'Annunzio; art historians Giuliano Briganti and Anthony Blunt; actor Kenneth Branagh, and coming in June, for a spin on the 'artist' thing, Madonna's yoga teacher for a one month 'yoga retreat'.

Piero della Francesca's Duke of Urbino (the one with the nose and red hat) is an ancestor, and Paola's got some of that lordliness, though not the nose. The 'villa' of Villa Lina has neither lordliness nor even a physical presence – having been torn down by her grandfather after its stint as German staff headquarters during World War II and its scavenging by locals looking for burnable wood and saleable parts. (Although one juicy – but sadly false – version has it that the main house was burned by

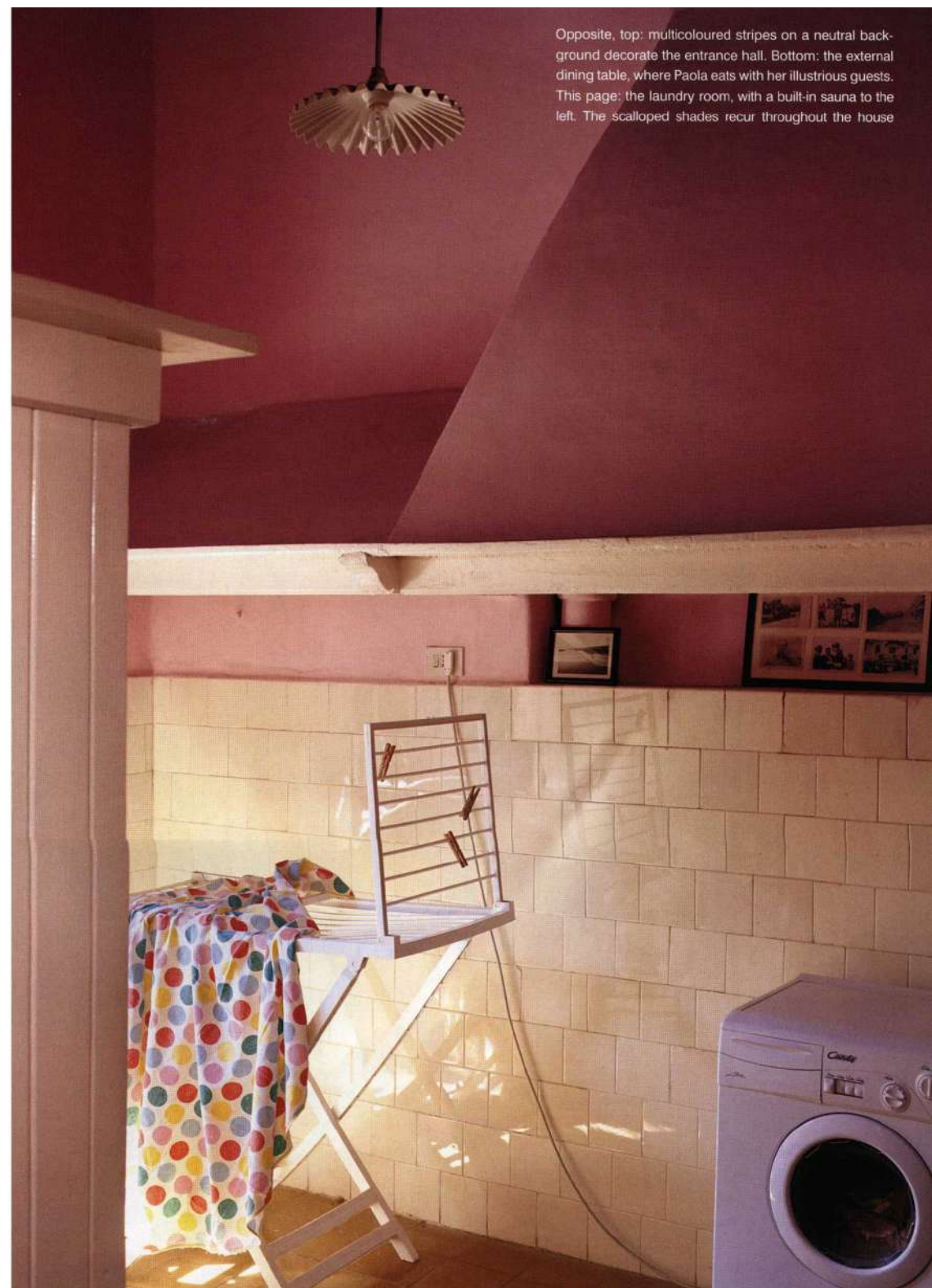
villagers because Mussolini swam in its pool.) In fact, the grounds of Villa Lina are studded with pools made by seven fountains, each of a different style, making it, perhaps, the only Postmodern garden in Italy. Rare magnolias and redwoods flourish on the grounds, and framing Portale's House – the gate house – are billows of blue hydrangea. Which Ricky just loved.

Now Ricky's had a chequered career. Born in Texas, he's been a cab driver, picture framer, ceramicist, florist, printer and artist, and, along with the aforementioned, has been called 'meticulous, obnoxious, disagreeable and totally fun.' The totally fun part explodes in his colour-wheel decorating. The rest of it explodes, occasionally, into painter troubles – those poseurs, sniffs Ricky, who called themselves painters; those 'truck drivers' to whom 'cutting-in' is something to do on the nearby Via Cassia. Painter-designer relations, here, finally degenerated into a *Sopranos*-esque incident when a red cross turned up on a hat: a warning, in mafia-speak, about sleeping with fishes (with *pesci*).

So back to those hydrangeas. Having decided to re-create their opal hues – from bud stage to blown – on the ground floor, Ricky went for chartreuse, periwinkle blue, purple, pink and plum: one for every room, since 'there's no such thing as a bad colour. Some are just a little more difficult than others. Like people.' People problems fade away in his placid salon, however, where you don't really notice the paint job at all, actually – just that swoony, meltable periwinkle blue and the old chairs and sofas he's upholstered in cheap and serviceable terry cloth and awning canvas, not to mention the mosquito-net draped Indian bed that only incidentally echoes the dainty protective netting the locals tack to their pantry shelves. Next to an armchair, a large Sandro Chia vase offers Art for all who crave it, while some Fifties glass from Paola's sister's former Rome shop adds zip. On the walls are Ricky's home-made frieze and chair rail.

From the violet maid's room off the kitchen, there's an eye-boggling view of three more rooms: the dark pink breakfast room, the blue-violet vestibule, and the old kitchen, where Ricky liked chartreuse (hydrangeas in bud) with rich plum woodwork and ceilings. (The plum's not really as dark as he might have liked, but that 'black issue' hovered.) If you drift out to his tender lavender-blue hall and ease on up the stone stairs, you find a spicy Indian-Persian second floor where each room, again, is unique and no colour repeats. Adjoining marigold and orange bedrooms open off a second stripy hallway, as does a pink laundry room-cum-sauna – a triumph of functional plumbing. The bathroom is celadon, and the *pièce de résistance* is unquestionably a 'boring tenement-brown' room that blossoms out into a second of luscious lipstick red. There's lots of energy, creative, personal and visual here. Lots of rooms. Lots of houses.

And it's all – vital, painterly, conflict-free – For Rent ■
 Ricky Clifton, 216 E 17th St, New York, 10003 NY (001 212 677 5320)



Opposite, top: multicoloured stripes on a neutral background decorate the entrance hall. Bottom: the external dining table, where Paola eats with her illustrious guests. This page: the laundry room, with a built-in sauna to the left. The scalloped shades recur throughout the house